

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000087

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SECDEF FOR DPMO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [SENV](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: A RARE GLIMPSE INTO BURMA'S NAGA REGION

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Burma's Naga region, abutting the Indian border some 350 miles NW of Mandalay, is quiet but edgy, with "three governments--the underground, the Indian underground, and the Government" all exploiting villagers' resources, according to a Naga leader. Traditional opium poppy cultivation for private consumption is reportedly giving way to larger-scale commercial cultivation with opium being exported into India and sold within Burma proper. There are a number of known WWII aircraft crash sites that local trekking guides are willing to show USG officials should we want to photograph or mark the sites' locations with GPS or other technology. Endangered species products were avidly being bought and sold at the Naga New Year festival. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Naga Welcome Mat Out, Briefly

About 100,000 ethnic Nagas inhabit the border region opposite Indian Nagaland in extreme NW Burma. The GOB normally prohibits foreigners from traveling to this isolated, mountainous, and sometimes tumultuous area except during the annual five-day Naga New Year Festival, this year held in Lahe (26.20 N, 95.27 E) in Sagaing Division. Emboff took advantage of this short window to visit the inaccessible Naga region January 13 - 17. Hundreds of Nagas walked, in some cases for days, or hitched rides into Lahe to attend this annual gathering of the clans. Like a Midwestern county fair, it was a time for young men and women to flirt, distant cousins to catch up on family news, and village groups to compete in cultural and sporting events. Festival organizers are trying to make this a profitable tourism event, although this year only 108 foreigners attended (less than half that of last year).

13. (SBU) "Strategic Route" West from the Chindwin River

The 56-mile road from the Chindwin River west to Lahe (which took Emboff six hours to traverse in the back of an open truck) is considered a "strategic route" by the regime and is maintained, just, by the army. Two villages along the road featured helicopter landing zones. The perimeter of one hilltop military outpost consisted of a nine-foot high bamboo fence with sharpened hedgehog-like spikes bristling outward, giving the place a menacing Neolithic look.

14. (SBU) Uneasy, but Quiet, Indo-Burmese Border

Normally 227 troops garrison Lahe Township, according to local authorities, but many more were evident during Naga New Year. Emboff and other foreigners were allowed to trek to off-road villages, but only with a police escort and only to the east of Lahe town. Sentries were posted on the outskirts of Lahe to prohibit foreigners from approaching the border, some 25 miles to the west. One Naga Christian minister described the border area as suffering great hardship due to the deprivations visited on locals by the Burmese Naga "underground," the "Indian underground," and the GOB's border security forces. Emboff heard no reports of recent military activity in the border region. Security in Lahe during the festival was heavy but discrete by Burmese standards. At one point a thin line of nervous, Uzi-toting soldiers separated a clutch of GOB VIPs from a mass of some 300 Naga youth carrying spears and swords. The young men were waiting to perform a traditional dance, and did so without incident.

Note: One common Naga gripe was that authorities insisted that men competing in cultural competitions wear polyester soccer shorts in lieu of the traditional brass gong codpiece or skimpy breechcloth. End Note.

15. (SBU) Traditional Opium Going Commercial

Naga elders claimed that the traditional small-scale production and use of opium in the Naga region was being overtaken by larger, more commercialized opium operations and was leading to increased drug use among villagers. Most of the commercial opium is reportedly trafficked into India, but some goes east into Burma proper, according to local sources. When Emboff asked if there were any Wa or other outsiders attempting to franchise opium poppy operations in the Naga hills, the answer was, "No, this is being done by greedy Nagas." Emboff personally saw no opium poppy fields in the

region.

16. (SBU) Support for WWII Remains Recovery

The Embassy produced trilingual fliers in Burmese, English, and Makuri Naga requesting that anyone with information about a WWII aircraft crash site inform Burmese authorities or the U.S. Embassy and not disturb the site in any way. Emboff distributed these fliers widely among Naga leaders in Lahe and trekked to neighboring villages to further spread the word. One person told Emboff he knew of an aircraft crash site in Lashee Township (just south of Lahe), and one trekking operator said he knew of several north of Lahe, adding that he would be willing to take U.S. officials there if anyone cared to photograph the aircraft debris or mark the sites' locations with GPS or other technology.

17. (U) CITES Nightmare

Nagas are avid hunters and their traditional dress includes many parts of big fierce animals. Animal products, including many from endangered and threatened species, were on display and for sale at the New Year Festival. Tiger teeth and claws, various kinds of large cat pelts, bear claws and skins, giant hornbill beaks and feathers, elephant ivory, snake skins, boar tusks, mythun horns, monkey parts, deer antlers, mountain goat horns, and several parts of unidentifiable animals were being bought and sold by Nagas, and by a few foreign tourists. One can hope that Chinese-made imitation tiger teeth and fake tiger and bear claws will increase the supply, thus lowering the economic value, of these items important to Naga culture and lucrative to Naga hunters. Post will work with the organizers of next year's festival to heighten the conservation awareness of foreign visitors.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The suggestion that USG representatives record the location and condition of known WWII aircraft crash sites in Naga territory seems worthy of further consideration by those engaged in our WWII remains recovery operations. Burma's Nagas did not appear any more oppressed by the regime than ethnic minority groups in other border areas, but they perhaps suffer more benign neglect due to the area's inaccessibility. For example, there is only one doctor to serve the 50,000 people in 1,200 square mile Lahe Township. Emboff heard nothing, not even rumors, about significant military activity around Lahe involving Burmese troops, Indian Naga insurgents, or separatist fighters driven from southern Bhutan last year. We are not in a position to say there is no serious trouble along the Indo-Burmese border, but if there is, it did not seem to be taking place around Lahe or in neighboring areas. End Comment.

Martinez